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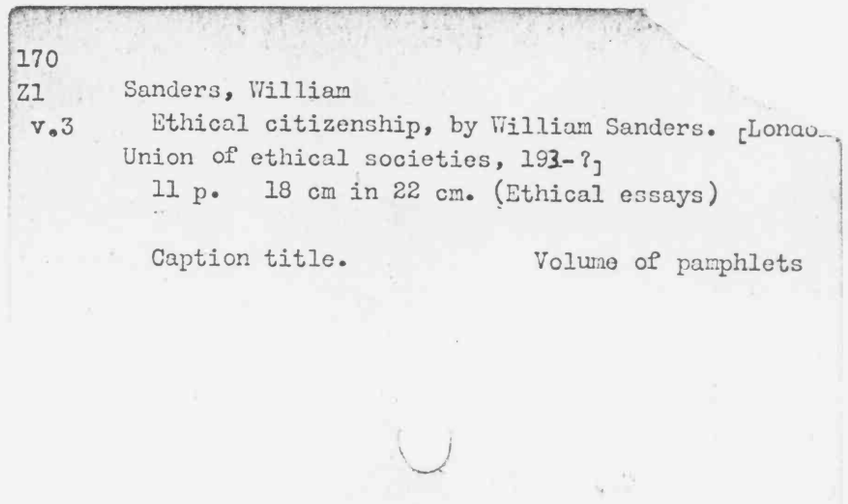

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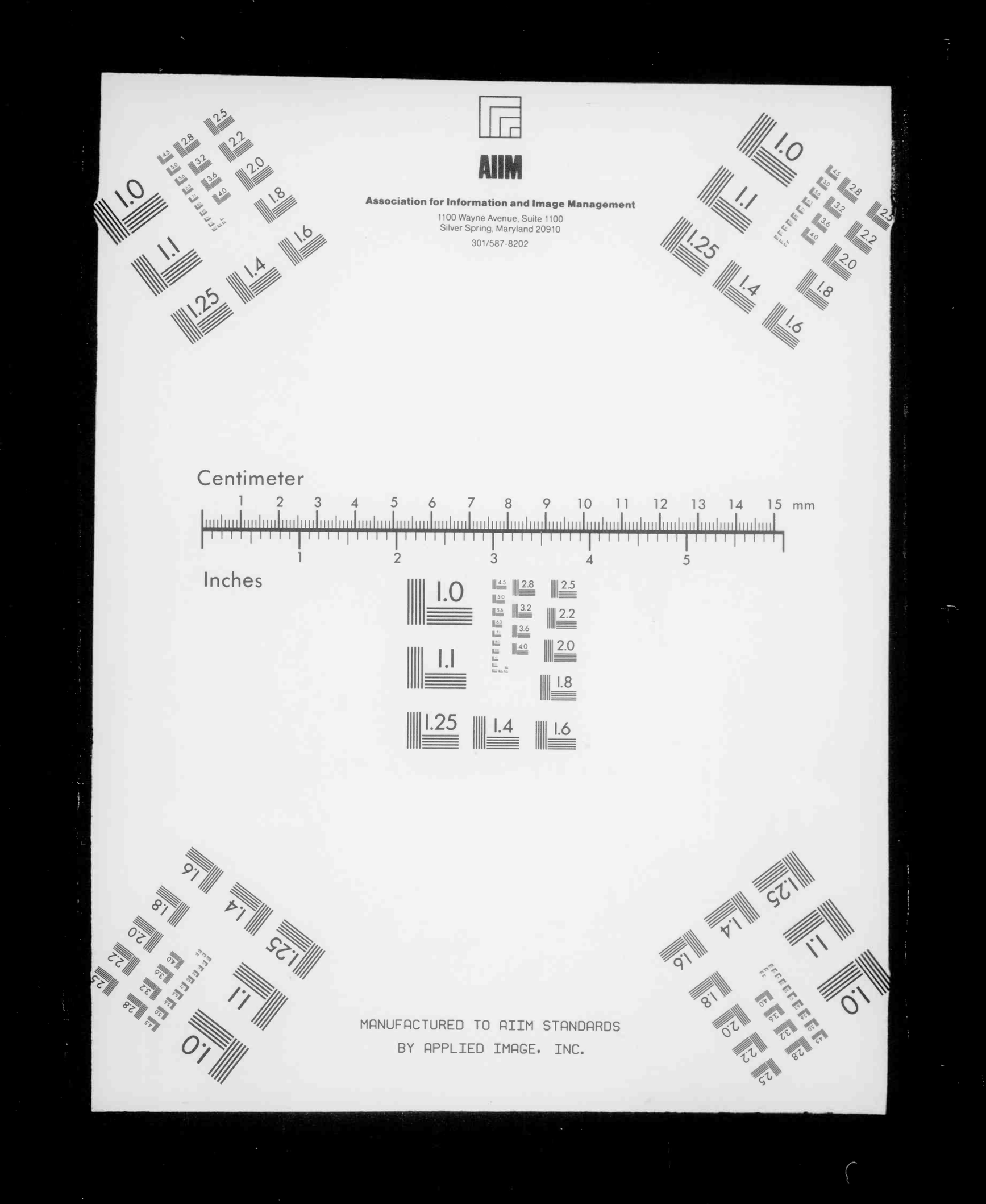
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No. 3

Ethical Essays. ONE PENNY.

ETHICAL CITIZENSHIP

By WILLIAM SANDERS

One of the four general aims of the Ethical Movement, as expressed in the constitution of the Union of Ethical Societies, is to "emphasise the moral factor in all personal, social, national, and international relations." By adopting this aim the Ethical Movement has taken upon itself the duty of giving judgment not only upon social and political problems of a general nature, but also upon those which are questions of the moment. In so doing the Movement does not necessarily undertake the work of practical, social, and political reform. That work, in the main, it leaves its members to carry out through the organisations that exist for those special purposes. The task of the Ethical Movement in this connection is to call attention to the need of reform, and to urge upon its members and listeners to take up their share in the public life and labour of the community and nation in which they live, and to use their power and influence as citizens for the advancement of civic and national righteousness.

It may be urged that the Ethical Movement is not fulfilling an otherwise neglected duty in appealing for a full recognition of the moral factor in the relations specified. The Church and the many religious denominations consider it as a part of their mission to urge mankind to take the side of right in all social and political issues. Indeed, it is a welcome sign of the progress towards humanism on the part of religious organisations that they are devoting more attention to arousing their followers to a higher sense of social responsibility. The establishment of "Citizen" Sunday is a sign that they are awakening to the fact that institutions for the inculcation of religious and moral principles must, if they wish to live and serve the purpose of their existence, endeavour to teach how those principles are to be applied to our complex common life. On the

other hand, however, the addition of "Citizen" Sunday to the calendar of the churches and chapels is a tacit confession of the fact that in the past this side of life and duty has been neglected by the orthodox religious organisations. Even now it cannot be said that the obligations of citizenship are insisted upon often enough, and with sufficient emphasis, by the leaders of those organisations. One Sunday out of fifty-two in the year is quite inadequate for the proper treatment of the great subject of citizenship—that is, the conscientious performance of our duty towards our neighbours. Therefore, the Ethical Movement, which concerns itself solely with human relations in their moral aspect, does meet a fundamental social need. Moreover, it ought to be able to supply the need most thoroughly, inasmuch as it elevates the Commandment relating to the duty towards our neighbours into the first place in its code.

The value of a persistent and consistent teaching of the power of consciously-used organised human effort to mould social conditions for good or evil is being appreciated more and more as the forces which move society are becoming understood. Until quite recently it was held by many thoughtful and optimistic men that there was little use attempting to guide the course of social evolution; that, in fact, there was no reason to endeavour to do so. Evolution would, in the course of time, without the help or interference of mankind, bring forth a higher and nobler social order than the one in which we live. The theories of the continental school of Socialists, as well as those of rigid Individualists, were founded chiefly on this belief. Many men, again, who have been disappointed in the results of their individual efforts for a high social ideal, or even for small reforms, come to the conclusion that man is helpless, and believe, as Robert Louis Stevenson says he believed, that change for the better must be left to work itself out through the action of "blind forces." We have gone by this stage of thought. We have learned the lesson that society can be shaped according to the will of the people composing it. If the average citizen's ideal is a low one, it will express itself in the moral poverty of our social structure; if it is high, then we shall see a correspondingly higher social system. As the average citizen, in his multifarious relations, increases the attention he pays to the moral factor

in those relations, so will society, as a whole, increasingly become the embodiment of justice.

It will, however, be soon brought home to the mind of the earnest man who seeks to establish just relations between himself and his fellows that the task is impossible if he endeavours to act alone. Suppose, for instance, he desires to raise the moral standard of his economic relations. He finds that some of the articles he consumes are produced by sweated labour, and by sweated labour only. Some good people think they have done sufficient in quietly refusing to purchase such articles when they are not absolute necessities. But the loss caused to the trade in the particular article is so infinitesimal that it fails to influence the prevailing conditions. Such isolated efforts, if properly organised by association, would, in time, have a good result, either through the medium of the law, or by voluntary agency. The first step in Ethical Citizenship is recognising and acting upon the necessity of association and organisation for realising social advance. In association the individual can give and take in that sharing of experience which is absolutely necessary for the proper application of personal theories as to the methods to be used to improve society. By organisation the individual finds that his power for good is capable of being used with effect.

Essentially democratic, the Ethical Movement stands for equality. It recognises that much of the evil in society arises from the fact that inequality, and not equality, is the ruling social principle. It looks forward to a time when the reverse shall be true, when each adult citizen shall stand on the same rights, and be held to the same responsibilities. Only on such a basis can a truly ethical democracy be founded; and only by organised human effort can this basis be secured.

Those who accept this teaching of our Movement, and who aspire to take part in the task of raising our common life to a higher level, will find countless avenues open to their activities. The Labour Movement, with which the Ethical Movement at its last International Congress declared its sympathy, is a demand on the part of the workers for a greater measure of social justice. It, therefore, should be the aim of our members not only to sympathise with, but to try to understand the attitude of, the organised workers, and, when possible, to render assistance. In no more valuable manner can assistance be given

than in spreading ideas. Deprived of proper education through lack of adequate opportunity, the worker's views are often narrow and mistaken. To young men of knowledge and culture there can be no better exercise of the voluntary duties of citizenship than the diffusion of the results of their education among the working people. Especially is there a demand for teaching such as ours. For the foremost leaders of the Labour Movement agree that it must be something more than a mere agitation for a larger share of the material things of life for its followers if it is to succeed in its object—a brighter and better life for the masses.

What the life of the masses is to-day can be known by all who will take the trouble to read the results of the researches made by Mr. Charles Booth in London, and by Mr. B. Seebohm Rowntree in York. For the man in touch with the life of our great cities it was not necessary that those researches should have been made to convince him that an appalling amount of poverty, misery, and suffering existed side by side with the opposite extreme of luxury and wealth. Economic inequality, with its outcome of physical, moral, and mental degradation, is manifest to all who have even but a slight acquaintance with society. Nevertheless, few people would have ventured to estimate that the abyss of poverty was so deep as it has been shown to be by the labours of the two philanthropists. The wildest statements of the most bitter agitator against the existing social order appear mild and temperate compared with those made after careful investigation by Messrs. Booth and Rowntree. The most saddening of their conclusions is that, in spite of all the toil and care of the Churches and Chapels, but little has been achieved by religious organisations in the work of real alleviation and uplifting. Something is lacking in their methods. Can this failure be due to their desire to do something for the people, instead of urging the people to be self-reliant and to do something for themselves? Can it be traced to a lack of faith in man? If so, can the Ethical Movement, with its appeal to man himself, hope to succeed where they have failed?

There are good grounds for believing that we shall succeed. In a striking passage of his great work, Mr.

Charles Booth ascribes to the new developments of local government the greater part of the improvements which he records as having taken place in the metropolis in the ten years during which his inquiries have been in progress. He notes a decrease of overcrowding which bears a relation to the organised efforts of the community to provide decent housing accommodation for the workers, coupled with clearances of slum areas. The moral sense of the people has been aroused in connection with the housing problem, and, disregarding the theoretical views as to the right or expediency of public authorities to trench upon a sphere hitherto sacred to private enterprise, has decreed that homes must be found for the people, even though fundamental principles of individualistic political economy be outraged in so doing. Pulpit denunciations of slum landlords, themselves often the creatures of circumstance, had failed to do that which the civic conscience acting through secular civic channels has accomplished. The number of persons now living in one-room tenements in London has decreased by eighty thousand—the population of a big city—in one decade. One cannot measure accurately, but still can imagine what this material change means in the possibilities of moral improvement among that vast number. There is no need to enlarge upon the crop of vice that springs up in overcrowded areas. Is not the harvest chronicled in the records of the police-courts, hospitals, infirmaries, and workhouses of our dense centres of population?

Again, turning to the problem of drink and drunkenness, there is some cause for thinking that man is groping towards a solution. Not that the orthodox religious bodies can show that they have found the way. It has been left to our municipal administrators to discover the best methods of combatting intemperance and its attendant evils of disorder, improvidence, and disease. The extension of communal activity in the direction of supplying human needs for education, recreation, and rational amusement has, according to Mr. Charles Booth, brought about a higher standard of public decency, and lessened the amount of excessive drinking, even though the total consumption of alcohol may not have been lowered.

These two instances of the effects of the operation of the collective will are sufficient to justify the faith in the spirit

of democratic citizenship which is held by the exponents of the Ethical Movement. How much greater those effects will be in the future when the minds and energies of men and women will be devoted whole-heartedly to the performance of their duty to their neighbour in its widest sense; when in every city, town, and village there will be an Ethical Society, a Citizen's Church, exhorting its congregation to follow a high ideal of social relationship; to place above personal interest the good of the community, and to bear cheerfully the burden of our common responsibilities.

We should not, however, limit the scope of the work of the Ethical Societies to exhortation. If a Society is to become, as it ought, the centre of democratic thought and influence for the neighbourhood, it must aim at being an educational force in the narrower sense of the word. In addition to its weekly services, the Society should endeavour to organise lectures and classes on subjects of social importance. Apart from the agitation carried on at election times by party politicians, of necessity one-sided, comparatively little is done to enlighten the people as to their collective power and responsibility as citizens. Considering the widespread ignorance on these matters, even among the educated classes, it is remarkable that the work of civic administration is carried on so well as it generally is. Here, then, is the opportunity for the Ethical Movement. Wherever possible it should seek to form a school or college of instruction in the duties and rights of citizenship. Social and political problems could be presented and discussed from an ethical standpoint; information in connection with the sciences dealing with human relations could be imparted; and a healthy and vigorous public spirit could be generated, which, although perhaps at first affecting only a small number of persons, could not fail, in the course of time, to have influence in local life and opinion. Upon the more intricate questions of national politics a clear white light could be shed, free from the colouring introduced by party prejudice. The object of such a scheme would be to educate and inspire men to serve the common good, not to train party politicians; providing only that the standpoint of the education and inspiration is democratic.

This task of creating an educated and thoughtful democracy is one of the most urgent of our time. Both supporters and

opponents of the democratic principle in the State express disappointment in the results of its application. Much of this disappointment is no doubt justified. But it must be remembered that in England we have had but little opportunity of knowing what the effect of education would be upon the working of the democratic principle. The mass of the electorate is still without instruction of real value with regard to the manner in which they should use its power. There is, as yet, no widely-taught and commonly-accepted conception of social justice and public duty. Even if the people were anxious to obtain knowledge on these matters they would find that there are but few opportunities of securing it. Yet, in spite of the absence of systematic and thorough educational influences of the kind needed, there is no real ground for the despair of democracy which is so prevalent in the thought and literature of our time. A social ethic is gradually being evolved which, in so far as it has had scope even in an imperfect form, gives promise of developing a more healthy condition of society. There is abroad a deeper feeling of common responsibility, together with a growing capacity for common action for social purposes. This feeling and capacity can be traced to the dawning perception in the minds of the people of the power which they hold in their hands.

The chief fear of democracy held by its thoughtful opponents is, that as the masses become fully conscious of their power, they will use it for corrupt and unworthy ends. So far it cannot be said that in England this fear has good grounds for its existence. But it is possible that a danger does lie in this direction. A people given over in great measure to drink and gambling, if they cannot conquer these evil habits, will not be able to maintain a high standard of public morality. The only way to guard against this danger becoming vital is for men and women who follow a loftier code of personal and public ethics than the one commonly held, not to leave the management of public affairs to those whose aims are low and whose interests are personal, but to actively assist in keeping civic and national politics free from corrupting agencies. This will not always be an easy task. The smart and clever politician becomes popular through appealing to the prejudices of the ignorant, and pandering to the tastes of the vulgar. To fight successfully against

ignorance and prejudice requires the patience and courage which arise from faith in a movement such as ours.

Another cause for despondency among those who hoped for a greater speed in an upward direction through the influx of democratic forces into the political sphere, is the lack of earnestness and steadiness among the enfranchised masses. They appear, in common with other classes of society, to be almost wholly engaged in the pursuit of pleasure and amusement. Matters which require thought seem to be repellent to them; politics appear to interest them only when they take a sensational form. Sport and the music-hall absorb a large amount of their time and attention which is left over from toil. This complaint comes, it is true, chiefly from the churches and chapels, but none the less it is, on the whole, just. The modern equivalent for bread and circuses seems to have come spontaneously to confound the believer in the regenerating power of democratic responsibility.

But underneath the seemingly universal levity and thoughtlessness of our age there is a growing element of seriousness, which is a source of hope for the future. An increasing minority of men and women is using life not merely as a means of enjoyment, nor of securing personal happiness, but for the purpose of promoting the commonweal to the best of their ability. Against the statistics of attendances at football matches can be placed the growing membership of the co-operative, the trade union, and the political labour movements, which show that a section of the masses is striving, if perhaps at times in a crude fashion, to attain to a higher form of social life. The increase of communal activity is evidence that members of other classes are giving brains and capacity for the same end. In truth, the dry bones are stirring, even if they are not yet sufficiently alive to run and leap.

To this element the Ethical Movement ought to appeal with special force. All those who trust in human effort to raise humanity would find in it a continual source of inspiration and encouragement. As the Movement widened its scope in the manner already suggested, it would be the means not only of stimulating, but also of systematising, social activities. Much of the energy and time devoted to social work is wasted in overlapping caused

by the divisions arising through varying speculative beliefs. Once the service of man came to be separated entirely from those beliefs, there could not fail to be a quickening of the rate of social progress, owing to the economy of effort secured by unity and co-operation in methods and organisation. The Ethical Movement is pre-eminently fitted to bring about that combination which is so urgently needed.

The school of citizenship, which an Ethical Society ought, in one of its aspects, to be, should, however, act as supplementary to the instruction given by the State in its schools. Without the foundations are laid in the elementary school, the character of the good citizen cannot be soundly built. Hence the Ethical Movement demands that the children shall be taught the duties and rights which await them when they arrive at the age when they become citizens. By such instruction is not meant simply the teaching of how an election is conducted, nor what are the powers of governing authorities and the history of their growth. This is, of course, important, but is not sufficient. The child should be brought to understand the meaning of society, and to understand that to be a good citizen means more than taking care to vote when an election takes place. It should be shown the importance of taking an active interest in the general life of the community; of honesty and efficiency in the work of public administration, and, also, how the general welfare depends in great measure upon honesty and efficiency in the individual. To the teaching given in the schools could be added visits to public institutions and their use explained. Thus instructed in the latter years of school life, the children of the people would be given the chance of taking an intelligent concern in politics. They would not have to rely upon the doubtful medium of the party press for their first step in civic and political education. They would be in a position to enter upon the study of social problems with a greater possibility of arriving at a right solution for their class than there is to-day, when the great majority of the workers is without even an elementary conception of the case for or against any proposal of national or municipal importance affecting themselves.

With a generation which had been given the beginnings of civic training in our schools, there would be a most

hopeful prospect in view. The great questions which are now looming up in the political world, and must be answered, such as those relating to Imperialism, to the limits of State control, to rationalism, to the State and religious teaching, to mention only a few, would go before a more intelligent jury for decision than we possess at present. As it is, we have only that vague and uncertain quality called common-sense to rely upon to give verdicts more or less deficient in wisdom.

In the meantime, while urging the introduction of some form of civic instruction in the schools, the Ethical Movement can act as an educational force for the minority who are seeking for guidance in the complexities of our social relations. Viewed from the ethical standpoint, all the questions referred to above take on a new aspect. The economist asks how far will a policy of Imperialism make England and her colonies and dependencies richer in material wealth. The politician asks how far it will tend to make the English race the dominating influence in the world. The Ethical Movement puts the question, How will Imperialism act for national righteousness? Will it help or retard it?

So with regard to the question of the functions of the State, either central or municipal, with regard to industry and trade. The point most often overlooked in discussions on this much-debated subject is the ethical one; that is, how far is it possible for the community to consciously order its economic life so as to prevent the harmful inequality and injustice which arise from the existing social arrangements, without creating new hindrances to individual and social development. It is possible that a higher synthesis may be evolved from the antithesis of Individualism and Collectivism if the tenets of the two schools of thought are considered and discussed from the ethical standpoint. Already the sharp antagonism between Individualists and Collectivists has softened down to differences in relation to the application of either of the methods to particular instances. What is now required is the bringing in of a further principle to determine which of the two methods should be adopted in such instances. For example, the problem of the liquor traffic is gradually reducing itself to one of private or public control. The decision ought to rest not upon

whether the community can manage the traffic better from the point of view of the economist—that is to say, make it pay better in the commercial sense—but whether the community can conduct it in a manner calculated to decrease over-consumption, and to promote temperance. In a community where, in general, the commercial interests are known to be subordinate to the ethical, public control would be the best method to adopt with regard to the sale of alcohol. On the other hand, where the reverse is the case, there would be but a doubtful social advantage in altering the present system.

The general tendency of our age is more and more in the direction of adding to the duties of the individual in his capacity as a citizen. Often these duties conflict with what appear to be his private and personal interests. At times in this conflict of public duty and private interest it is difficult to decide which ought to take the first place. Here, again, the Ethical Movement has a work to do. A science of ethics, fully rounded and complete, should be able to dictate a line of conduct in which individual and social interest should harmonise. As yet, we are without such a complete and rounded science. Each Ethical Society should be a means of helping forward its development by supplying systematised data drawn from the studies, experience, and work of its members.

With the Ethical Movement having a foothold in every centre of democratic activity, preaching a lofty ideal for our common life, inculcating the religion of duty, continually bringing before the minds of the people the responsibility of the individual towards society, and acting as an inspiring guide to those who desire by organised human effort to make the world better, there would be no need for anxiety as to the future of our nation. This is the great object which the workers in our Movement have placed before them. We appeal to all men and women who feel the stirring of the social conscience, and who wish to discover the way to satisfy its claims, to join us, and help to attain that object. Beyond it lies the hope and dream of the reformers of all ages—the City of the Light.

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